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Never Knew CIA Was Opening Mail, Ex-Postal Chiefs Say

By Norman Kempster and Orr Kelly
From News Services

Three former postmasters general today told a Senate committee they never knew the CIA was opening mail. Two of them conceded they really did not want to know anyway and the third said he couldn't find out.

J. Edward Day, who headed the Post Office from the beginning of the Kennedy administration in January 1960 until Aug. 9, 1963, said he was told the CIA was engaged in a secret project involving the mails but he said he shut off the conversation because he did not want to know about it.

Winton M. Blount, head of the department during the first two years of the Nixon administration, said he was told that mail was being removed from the Post Office, given to the CIA and returned the next day.

But he said, "I don't know what was being done with it." He said he never asked if it was being opened.

In contrast, John A. Gronouski, Day's successor, said he was never told the CIA was opening mail although he tried repeatedly to find out about any cases in which mail was delayed or diverted.

"I THINK IT is incredible that a person at a top position in government could have something like this going on in his organization and not know about it," Gronouski said. "It wasn't that I didn't try to know about it."

A CIA memo dated April 23, 1965, indicated Gronouski was not told about the project because a Senate subcommittee was investigating privacy at that time and CIA officials decided that the postmaster general should not be put in a position where he could reveal the project to the committee.

The CIA has confirmed that for about 20 years, from 1953 through 1973, it opened mail between the United States and Communist countries. Of the seven postmasters general who served during that period, the CIA has said that three were informed and four were not. Day and Blount are the only two still living whom the CIA has said were briefed on the project.

FORMER CIA DIRECTOR Richard Helms has testified that he personally was involved in briefing both Day and Blount. He has said under oath that he told both of them mail was being opened.

A CIA memo placed in the committee record said Helms personally showed "a few selected examples" of the product of the mail opening operation to Blount.

The June 3, 1971 memo said: "Mr. Helms showed the Postmaster General a few selected examples of the operation's product, including an item relating to Eldridge Cleaver, which attracted the PMG's special interest."

Blount testified that although Cleaver's name was mentioned during the meeting, he can recall no evidence to show that the mail of the black revolutionary was being opened.

Both Blount and Day told the committee that they believed the CIA was protecting the national interest and should not be impeded.

"I THOUGHT THEN and I think now that the CIA has certain powers that put them in a different class from other people... The CIA is something different and very special," Day said.

Sen. Walter F. Mondale, D-Minn., responded, "We are both lawyers. I don't recall seeing that in the Constitution."

Blount said he supported any CIA project as long as it was legal. He said he assumed the mail opening was legal because Helms told him that then Atty. Gen. John N. Mitchell had been informed.

The CIA has said the mail opening operation was illegal.

"My understanding was that mail would be removed to the mail stream and given to the CIA and returned to the mail stream the next day," Blount said.

"After being read?" Mondale asked.

"I didn't know what was being done with it," Blount said.

"Didn't you ask?" Mondale said.

"I don't recall," Blount answered.

The CIA memo said Helms briefed Mitchell the day before he saw Blount and that Mitchell "fully concurred in the value of the operation and had no 'hangups' concerning it."

Helms is scheduled to testify and is sure to be asked why he had personally supported the operation — code-named HTLINGUAL — even though other officials of the CIA had long felt it was clearly illegal and of dubious value as a source of intelligence.

Between 1953 and 1973, when the operation was stopped, the committee was told, a CIA office in New York filmed the envelopes of 2,705,726 letters and opened 215,320 of them. The largest single recipient of information from the intercepted mail — 57,846 items — was the FBI.

Howard Osborn, former director of security for the agency, told the committee his office was responsible for running the New York operation, but he said he did it for another CIA division.

"It was their Cadillac. They built it, they drove it. My job was to maintain it, to change the oil," he explained and then added, a few minutes later: "The maintenance was very good. The product was worthless."